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ABSTRACT

After the government established the Home-School Cooperation Committee in 1993, parent involvement in Hong Kong schools has received increased attention. This paper presents findings of a study that examined the attitudes of various groups toward the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) and its role. Specifically, the paper attempts to: (1) provide understanding of the perceptions of the various actors in the school system towards the PTA; (2) discuss the functions of the PTA and to explore its possibilities and limitations with respect to school education; and (3) propose a model to help illustrate and analyze the various PTA functions and networking. Data were derived from a survey of all PTA chairpersons, school supervisors, and principals. Teacher and parent samples were drawn from 99 kindergartens, 112 primary schools, 90 secondary schools, 12 English School Foundations and International Schools, and 13 special schools. Parents, constrained by time, expressed apathetic views about the PTA. Teachers were constrained by heavy workloads; principals in general assigned the PTA as a medium-to-low priority and did not invite parents to participate in school decision making. It is recommended that PTAs improve their home-school communication in order to increase parent involvement and collaborate with schools to develop complementary objectives. A model illustrating the various PTA functions, including networking, is also presented. Eight tables and 3 figures are included. (Contains 38 references.) (LMI)

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Functions of the Parent Teacher Association and PTA Networking -- A Hong Kong Perspective

by

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1. Introduction

After the Government established the Home-school Cooperation Committee in 1993, parent involvement in schools has received increasing attention in Hong Kong. An apparent development is the drastic increase of the number of parent-teacher association (PTA) / Parent Association (PA) (hereafter called PTA) in schools. In July, 1993, according to the Education Department, the total number of PTAs was 133, out of which 29 were from special schools, 64 were from secondary schools, 39 from primary schools and one from a kindergarten. In November, 1995, the number of PTAs went up to 369. This is almost a three-fold increase within two and a half years. It is estimated that the majority of the PTAs come from the secondary schools and that about half of the secondary schools already have a PTA. However, the majority of the kindergartens and primary schools for various reasons have still not set up parent organizations. It is likely that the number of the PTAs will continue to increase for some time, based on the figures of new PTAs released since 1993.

The support of the development of the PTA has come from the Home-school Cooperation Committee established in 1993 (Educ2ation and Manpower Branch, 1992). This committee has been annually funded the setting up and the activities of PTAs. It has also publicized the concepts and practices of PTAs via exhibition, pamphlet and newsletter (Education Department, 1993-94).

Parent organizations are quite common in western countries. Parent associations (PA) are common in countries like Australia, France, West Germany, Belgium, Luxembourg, Denmark and the Netherlands. They are subsidized directly or indirectly by the government. Some of these associations are locally, regionally and nationally influential and in some cases the associations have offices even in government buildings (Macbeth, 1993).

In contrast to other European countries, the parent-teacher association (rather than the parent association) is the

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norm in the U.K.. Traditional PTAs and PAs in the U.K. were implied to "have been largely concerned with fund-raising and transmitting information" and "have not usually challenged the school's way of doing things" (Munn, 1993, p.1). They were criticized for their "peripheral" nature, inability to deal with the different interests of the school and parents and lack of appeal to parents (Macbeth, 1993). However, in a vivid account of the development of a PTA in a U.K. primary school, Redfern (1988) showed that besides "purse-filling", the PTA had forged good relations between parents and teachers, between parents and between the school and the community.

In the U.S.A., PTAs have been associated with school improvement. Radd (1993) pointed out that the PTA played a vital role in long term educational outcomes for children. Macray (1986) & Wakefield (1984) illustrated education quality could be improved by PTA's providing valuable resources to schools, awarding grants for teachers to try innovative practices, holding student award programmes and sponsoring social functions to recognize the good work of teachers.

This Study

Studies focussing on the PTA have been scarce, even in the U.S.A. and the U.K.. No model of the functions of the PTA was found in the literature. This paper attempts to (i) provide understanding of the perceptions of the various actors in the school system towards the PTA, (ii) discuss the functions of the PTA and to explore its possibilities and limitations with respect to school education and (iii) propose a model to help to illustrate and analyze the various PTA functions and networking. In this paper, a cross setting comparison will be made. The perceptions of the PTA in Hong Kong will be compared, whenever possible, with those in some overseas countries. In the recent reform of the home-school cooperation in Hong Kong, it is expected that this study can help educators and the Education Department in formulating policies and strategies for the development of the PTA.

The Data in this study is mainly drawn from the various surveys and the focus studies in the Home-school Cooperation Research undertaken by the University of Hong Kong Team (Education Department (ED), 1994) in which the author had taken part. In this Research, all the PTA chairpersons and the school supervisors (school managers) / and principals of all Hong Kong schools were included. Teacher and parent samples were drawn from 99 kindergartens, 112 primary schools, 90 secondary schools, 12 English School Foundations (ESF) and International Schools and 13 special schools, which are about 1/5 - 1/7 of the school population in various settings. The number of responses received are shown as follows: (Table 1)

Table 1 Insert Here

This paper is divided into four parts. In Section 2, the general views of various actors towards the PTA are summarized. In Section 3, the views of various actors on the functions of the PTA are presented and discussed. In Section 4, the various types of PTA networking will be introduced. In Section 5, a model for the functions of the PTA and PTA networking will be proposed. In the last section, the strategies for developing the PTA in Hong Kong are recommended.

2. General Views of Various Actors on the PTA

2.1 Parents' views on the PTA

The setting up of the PTA is to some extent welcomed by parents. As found in the survey, there were only 3% of kindergarten (K) parents, 4% of primary school (P) parents and 8% of secondary school (S) parents that felt they did not need the PTA. However, more than one third of the parents, i.e. 37%, 34% and 42% in settings K, P and S respectively, indicated that it did not matter whether there was a PTA in the school or not. Though there were some parents who were enthusiastic about running the PTA, many parents expressed in the interviews that "having a PTA is just better than nothing" (ED, 1994, Chapter 35). Based on this poll of opinions, it is expected that PTA activities can only attract some school parents. In fact, the PTA chairpersons expressed that the major difficulty they encountered in running the PTA was parents' apathetic attitudes. Forty-two percentage of them said they always or sometimes had this difficulty. In fact, based on the reports of PTA chairperons, the % of the PTA which had over half of the parents attending the following types of activities are: social events for parents and students (38%), social events for parents and teachers (55%), sports events (26%), parent education (21%), curriculum forum (28%) and forum on school practices and policies (26%).

2.2 Teachers' and principals' views on the PTA

Teachers welcomed the setting up of the PTA with some limited enthusiasm. Secondary school teachers seem to be more enthusiastic about it. A number of 67% of them welcomed the PTA

in comparison with 52% of primary school teachers and 52% of kindergarten teachers. Only 4% of secondary school teacher, 4% of kindergarten teachers and 8% of primary school teachers did not welcome the setting up of the PTA. These findings are consistent with the high ratio of the PTA in secondary school setting.

However, many principals and teachers did not think the setting up of the PTA as something very urgent and important in practice. Among various home-school improvement measures, the schools put it in the medium priority and the kindergartens listed it as the lowest priority (Table 2). This is

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Table 2 Insert Here

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consistent with the very small number of PTA in kindergartens. The top priorities of improvement measures include "reducing the workload of teachers", "providing training to parents and teachers" and "increasing the contacts with parents in general" (ED, 1994).

3. Functions of the PTA

3.1 The role of the PTA in home-school communication

The role of the PTA in Hong Kong is mainly perceived as communicative. The PTA chairpersons indicated the following objectives as very important to their PTAs: (Table 3)

Table 3 Insert Here

The most important objective referred was as "a means of communication". This emphasis of PTA chairpersons (93% were parents) seems to reflect their expectation to improve the school-home communication. In fact, the school-to-home communication leaves much to be desired (ED, 1994). Both local schools and parents were found to seldom make contacts with each other. About 50% of the parents considered the contacts made by schools were either "not sufficient" or "not certain if it is sufficient". Parents' knowledge about the school was

minimal. About 2/3 of the parents did not know if their schools had a school management committee and about 1/3 of the parents did not know if their schools had a parent-teacher association.

In addition, students were found often blocking the communication between home and school. Many parents are no longer well informed especially after their children attend secondary schools. This might be due to the problem-oriented contacts between school and home and also the search for independence of the students in secondary schools (ED, 1994). Quite a few PTA executives indicated that one of their intentions in joining the PTA was to find out more about how their children are getting on in schools.

The recent drastic increase of the number of PTA seems to reflect the need of improving the communication and relationship between schools and parents. For the parents, they may expect the PTA to provide them with more information about their children and the school. For the schools, improving their relationship with parents and their image among parents may be of strategic importance. Schools probably realize that parents' opinions are important when making a choice of schools for their children. Some schools would attempt to set up the PTA to "impress" (Giddens, 1993) the parents in order to improve the student intake. One senior teacher of a private school frankly pointed out that his school set up the PTA to raise its image among parents. Further, some school principals also see setting up the PTA as possessing an innovative spirit in education. Nevertheless, the publicity of the Home-school Cooperation Committee in home school cooperation with special reference to the PTA seems to have fostered a good image of the PTA among schools and parents and bring about the rapid development of the PTA.

In comparison with the counterpart in Hong Kong, the PTA in the U.S.A. did not seem to put as much emphasis on school-home communication. The function of communication was not explicitly mentioned by the National PTA of the U.S.A. The National PTA (1987, cited in Radd (1993)) stated the objectives of PTAs as (i) participating in children's education, (ii) volunteering in schools and (iii) participating in decision making. These objectives seemed to be held by Australian PTAs too (Sing Tao Yat Pao, 1994). The reason why American PTAs did not stress their role in communication was perhaps because school-home communication was considered as the basic obligation of the school (Epstein, 1995). Yet, in Hong Kong, the PTA seems to be used to complement or compensate the present "deficient" home-school communication. The PTA chairpersons only ranked the above National PTA's objectives as the 4th, 5th, 7th and 8th popular objectives (see Table 3). They considered that their primary need was improving school-

home communication rather than rendering supports to either school or home.

It is not certain if the PTA can really improve the communication between home and school as expected. It has to be pointed out here that the principals in local schools have a high efficacy belief about the PTA. About 67% of the principals in local kindergartens and schools believed that the PTA was the most effective way in promoting the home-school cooperation. However, this opinion was not shared by the principals in ESF and international schools who had more experience with the running of the PTA. A study in the U.S.A. elementary schools also showed that a majority of PTA presidents and school principals did not rate the PTA as the most important communication link between school and home (Henderson, 1989). Possibly the PTA, at least in its present mode (run at the school level), may only help parents to understand the school rather than their individual children.

However, the setting up of the PTA seems to affect the nature of communication between school and home. In a small scale qualitative study on the perceptions of teacher-parent contacts of 40 pupils aged from 11 to 16, it was found that pupils' positive experience about teacher-parent contacts mainly came from the informal contacts, such as the PTA meetings (Chau et al, 1995). In these contacts, teachers and parents seemed to convey more 'positive' messages to each other.

The PTA may also be able to provide a social venue / contact point for parents and teachers. According to the theory of symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934), people would fashion their behaviour to fulfil the expectations of others and to receive their recognition. Upon increasing contacts, parents and teachers may change their behaviour to please the other party. Eventually, their perceptions of each other may be changed. It has to be pointed out that the parents who come to the PTA meetings are not predominantly those whose children had problems. As a result of these non-problem-oriented contacts, teachers should be able to develop a higher efficacy belief about parents.

3.2 The role of the PTA in teaching and administration

The setting up of the PTA in Hong Kong is probably based on the belief that parents would not intervene in the teaching and administration of the school. This belief seems to be shared by both parents and schools. The purposes of setting up the PTA according to local school principals and teachers are as follows: (Table 4)

Table 4 Insert Here

In all of the settings, more than 90% of the principals and teachers agreed that the improvement of understanding, communications and relationships were the important purposes of setting up the PTA (items a,b & c). Involvement in teaching and policy making were only ranked by the school personnel as the 4th and the 6th priority of the PTA. In addition, the latter objectives were seldom found in the constitutions of the PTAs. The most popular ones shown in the constitutions were again about improving home-school communication and pupils' welfare. It appears that the PTAs in Hong Kong, similar to those in traditional U.K. schools, are mainly intended to target at the "peripheral matters" rather than the "core task" of the school (Munn, 1993). This "peripheral nature" of the PTA apparently would not pose as much threat to the principals and teachers in their professional role.

Similar to teachers and principals, school managers mainly perceived the PTA as "a bridge between parents and schools" and "to improve the teacher-parent relationship" (Table 5).

Table 5 Insert Here

School managers tended not to involve parents in school decision making and operation. "Participate in formulating policy " and "provide volunteers to school" were much less perceived as the functions of the PTA. In the survey, it was also found that 60%, 72% and 70% of the school mangers in settings S, P and K respectively were worried about the possible interference to school administration from the PTA. Some school managers were worried that parents might change the original school aims after joining the management committee (ED, 1994, Chapter 36). As pointed out by the International Visiting Panel earlier, Hong Kong schools were operated mostly by voluntary bodies and had no connection to the local community (Llewellyn Report, 1982). It is possible that the parents who have heavy involvement in schools will be seen by the sponsoring body as "intruders" threatening the power structure of the school.

Parents did not intend to take part in school decision making either. It was found that 50-53% of parents were not

sure if they should be represented on the school board. Further, less than 1/3 of the parents wished to monitor, to decide on or to discuss school matters, such as staffing, medium of instruction and quantity of homework. Parents mainly just wanted to be "kept informed" and "did not want to take part in school" (ED, 1994). Even in special schools, where home-school cooperation is expected to be more intensive and extensive, the attitudes of parents did not differ much from other parents. The "non-intervening" intention of parents was also shown among the PTA chairpersons (Table 3). Support in teaching and involvement in decision making were only ranked as the 7th and 8th priority by them. In summary, the consensus among PTA chairpersons, principals, teachers, school managers and parents about the purposes of the PTA seem to reflect a common belief in the separate responsibilities rather than the shared responsibilities between school and home in children's education (Epstein, 1987).

The reluctance of parents to take part in routine teaching and administration may also be related to their availability. In the survey, parents' "lack of time" was rated as the greatest difficulty in setting up the PTA by the principals and teachers in all settings (ED, 1994) (Table 6).

Table 6 Insert Here

The worry about parents' lack of time was not only expressed by local school staff, but was also shared by the staff in ESF and International Schools. It is probably beyond the capabilities of most parents to come to school to provide assistance in teaching and administration. On the other hand, the school staff also seem to have time (workload) constraint (Table 6, item d). These constraints on the parts of both parents and teachers would probably reinforce the "separate responsibility" and their "mutual ignorance". Understandably, parents and teachers may tend to perform their own educational roles in respective locations and limit the communication with each other.

Another reason for school personnel's unwilling to involve parents in teaching and administration may be due to their low efficacy belief about parents (Table 6, items a, b & c). In the eyes of the majority of principals and teachers, parents were not interested in setting up the PTA and did not understand educational issues.

Despite the fact that most parents might not intend to

intervene in school teaching and administration, a considerable proportion of principals and teachers did have such worries (Table 6, items e & f). Among the school personnel in various settings, there were more primary school teachers (49%) and principals (54%) who agreed that the PTA might intervene with the professional autonomy of teachers and with the school policies respectively. This is consistent with the finding that primary school teachers are slightly less supportive in setting up the PTA (Section 2.2). Actually in the focus group discussion and interviews, quite a few primary school teachers commented on parents' opinions to schools as "the non-professional leading the professional".

In Hong Kong, the reports about the involvement of the PTA in school teaching and administration were few and many of these occurred in elite schools (ED, 1994, chapter 36). Some of these activities include parent orientation programme, extra-curricular activities, library operation, school routines, school outings/trips and school functions. It was found that the "Band 1" school parents, who also had relatively high income, tended to attend school functions and the PTA meetings more readily than the "Band 5" school parents (ED, 1994). < Note: A study in the U.S.A. also showed that there were more parents highly involved (>50% attendance) in high SES schools than in Low SES schools (Henderson, 1989). > The parents in elite schools seem to be more willing, confident or proud of taking part in school. Indeed, there was one parent, who served as the chairperson of two PTAs, only revealed his identity with the more famous school.

Despite the present low involvement of the PTA in school operation, its potential influence should not be ignored. There has been an increasing number of primary schools inviting parents to assist in the school picnic and this seems to be well received by teachers. There has also been an increased awareness of civil rights and practice of democracy in the community. All the members of the Legislative Council in Hong Kong were elected in one way or another in the 1995 election. Schools probably cannot plan alone in the education business. In 1993-94, it was noted that a PTA protested against the Government which attempted to move a school site for road works and there was another PTA of a primary school that criticized the change in the medium of instruction in its associated secondary school. In 1994-95, while the Government granted the premises of a Government school for the gathering of Philippino maids on Sunday, the PTA of that school challenged the Government's decision for not consulting it prior to such arrangement.

In the long run, the PTA was perceived to be able to promote parents' awareness of their responsibility and status in school education. The PTA chairpersons believed that the

PTA would be able "to highlight the parents' share of responsibility in educating children" (94% agreed) and "to promote the parents' status in the school" (74% agreed) (Table 3). It is speculated that if parents' status is improved, teachers may be more likely to listen to parents, to value their opinions and knowledge, to negotiate with parents and to consider their expectation for their children. They may "make reference" to parents in teaching (Merton, 1968). Though the PTA is mainly intended for communication by various actors at this stage, it appears that it may provide the basis and conditions for future parent involvement in school teaching and administration.

3.3 The PTA role in parent education

One of the major criticisms of the PTA in the U.S.A. was its negligence of parenting education (Radd, 1993). In view of the deteriorating family conditions, Radd was of the opinion that future PTAs in the States should focus on supporting the families via parent education and parent growth programmes.

In Hong Kong, the chairpersons of PTAs seem to recognize the importance of parent education. Forty-four percent of them indicated that this was a very important objective of their PTAs (Table 3). However, only a minority of the teachers and principals in local primary and secondary schools agreed that schools should take up the role of educating parents (Table 7). Many principals and teachers pointed out in

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Table 7 Insert Here

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interviews and focus group discussion that their duties were to teach the pupils, but not the parents. Nevertheless, school personnel tend to favor providing parent education via the PTA than the school (Table 4, Item e).

Interestingly, by comparing Table 3 and Table 4, it was found that the PTA chairpersons and the school personnel had slightly different priorities about the objectives of the PTA (Table 8). PTA chairpersons perceived parent education to be

Table 8 Insert Here

more important than school personnel did. They wished to be equipped in parenting rather than to be involved in school business.

4. Types of PTA Networking

As discussed in Section 3, the PTA in Hong Kong is expected to play an important role in school-home communication and to build a bridge between schools and parents. By further exploring the activities of PTAs in a few schools and kindergartens, it was found that the PTA had a networking function. Though the PTA is intended initially to improve the teacher-parent communication (the P-T network), it has the potential and is capable of developing into other meaningful networks. It can network the good wills of concerned parties, reinforce their relationship, increase their confidence (Leung et al, 1994) and eventually contribute to the positive learning outcome of students. The networks that a PTA could build were found to include the following types:

(i) between parents and teachers (P-T),
(ii) between parents (P-P),
(iii) between parents and students (P-S),
(iv) between parents, teachers and community (P-T-C).
(v) between PTAs

This networking function of the PTA is discussed in this section.

4.1 The parent-teacher network

It is noted that the networking between parents and teachers can occur at three levels, namely (i) the school level, (ii) the grade/ form level and (iii) the class level. The majority of the PTA activities in Hong Kong has been operated at the school level. However, many parents found that school level meetings could not meet their primary needs. They favoured the parent meeting at the class level. They wanted to be better informed by the class teacher about the learning progress of their children and also how they were getting on with their classmates and teachers (ED, 1994, chapter 36).

The parent-teacher network at class level could be found

in the German-Swiss International School (GSIS) in Hong Kong. The school has a system of "Klassenpflegschaften" (hereafter called class PTA). Its mode of operation is similar to those in Germany schools. The chairperson, the deputy-chairperson and the secretary of this organization are all parents. This class PTA aims to establish a close link between the parents of the students in a class and the class teacher as well as the subject teachers. It has the advantage of pulling together relevant parties to focus on the educational matters of a comparatively small group of children. It would enable teachers and parents to exchange relevant information about children's development and learning at home and in school and allow both parties to cooperate in the "core task" of school education. It may facilitate parents' and teachers' understanding of individual children and assist them to target their real needs. The principal of the GSIS believed that when democracy took place in the classroom, the education quality would be improved. This type of class-level liaison would probably require the commitment of both parties and great confidence on the part of teachers.

The PTA run at the grade / form level was not known in Hong Kong. However, it appears that the kind of grouping of parents and teachers may be especially meaningful in discussing their common concern in choosing programmes and careers in the transition years, for example from K3 to P1, P6 to S1 and S3 to S4.

The parent-teacher network developed at the class level and grade level may serve as the basis of the network at the school level. Some parents indicated that, if they had got acquainted with some parents, they might be more likely to attend future school meetings because they wanted to meet their friends there (ED, 1994, Chapter 36).

The parent-teacher network may provide the school with valuable feedback to improve its operation (ED, 1994, Chapter 36). It was learned that one Caritas nursery set up an alumni PTA to liaise graduated children and their parents (Leung et al, 1994). This network did provide the nursery with useful information about the programmes of various primary schools which their old students were attending. As a result, the nursery was able to tailor their curriculum for students' smooth transition from nursery to primary school.

4.2 The parent-parent network

Among the parent teacher organizations in Hong Kong, sixteen percent of them are parent associations (PAs). The majority of the PA (73%) come from special schools (ED, 1994, Chapter 35). It appears that the parents therein need the

association to support them in helping their children with special needs. The PA also existed in some ordinary schools. Some principals preferred to set up the PA to PTA because they thought this would reduce the hardship of teachers. Yet, these schools still provided considerable clerical support to the PAs and exerted influences upon the PAs through the principals or designated teachers.

In one nursery and one kindergarten of Caritas, the PTAs served as the network between parents. They facilitated the mutual support between parents, such as in child care and in the sharing of teaching resources (Leung et al, 1994). More important, the PTA activities have become a forum for parents to share their parenting experience and their knowledge of children's growth. It may be worth mentioning that these PTAs were chaired by the principals, who might have considerable professional input in their operation.

4.3 The parent-student network

PTAs were found to organize activities for parents to interact with their children and to achieve a satisfying and enjoyable learning experience (Leung et al, 1994). These activities may include family camp, carnival, picnic, lantern night, Christmas celebration and reading programme. They might not only improve the parent-child relationship of specific families, but also the relationship of the children with other adults (Leung et al, 1994) and the teachers' perceptions of parents. In the parent-child game day of one Christian kindergarten, a teacher changed her mind about a parent, whom she believed to be very career-minded and neglecting her child. The teacher found out the parent actually had a good relationship with her child, when she observed them playing games (Pang, 1995a). Radd (1993) was of the opinion that schools the should provide programmes to improve parent-child relationship as well as parent-school relationship. Understandably, both kinds of relationship would contribute to the learning outcome of students in the long run.

It is noteworthy that the National PTA in the U.S.A. (National PTA, 1989) has endorsed the setting up of PTSA (Parent-Teacher-Student Association) since 1958. The National PTA has been encouraging member associations to include students' membership and involvement in PTA activities. It said "by giving students a voice and helping them with concerns", "insight, enthusiasm and energy" will be added to the PTA. Despite the fact the PTSA may not be well received in Hong Kong, it is apparently unwise to exclude students from PTA activities and not to improve the image of the PTA among students.

4.4 The parent-teacher-community network

Most Hong Kong schools are sponsored by voluntary bodies which are not federated on a neighbourhood basis (Llewellyn Report, 1982). This has limited the way they liaise with the local community. It is common that all of the school managers and most teachers do not live in the same region as the school. These school personnel may have little contact with the local community and little interest in its development.

School endeavour in liaising with the community, if any, sometimes comes from individual principals. Some principals are appointed to the consultative bodies in the local community, such as the district board and its sub-committees. These principals may encourage their schools to participate in community activities for various reasons. However, it is noted that many of these involvements have nothing to do with the parents or the PTA of the school.

There may be several ways for schools to be involved in their community. Some schools lend their premises to the various bodies in the community for holding activities. Some schools/PTAs may invite the social workers of the non-government organizations (NGO) in the local community to organize activities for parents, such as seminars and family camp. Yet, the rate of teacher's participation in these activities was often low. Parents were often disappointed at not being able to meet class teachers (ED, 1994, Chapter 36). However, these activities could still facilitate the parent-parent interaction or the parent-community interaction.

The PTA was found to provide services to the community. The PTAs of some elite schools sometimes organized carnivals to raise funds for the schools and other charitable organizations. Some PTAs provided social services to the community, such as planting or cleaning campaigns (Leung et al, 1994). Further, in some special schools, the parent organizations and schools may team up in petition to the Government for better welfare of handicapped children.

4.5 The inter-PTA communication network

The PTA Communication Network was set up recently by the Home-school Cooperation Committee to liaise with the various PTAs in the region. Besides setting up this network, the Committee also published a joint PTA newsletter (Education Department, 1995).

Politically, the PTA Communication Network, liaising with various PTAs with a common concern of children's education, has

the potential to evolve into a social concern body or a pressure group, like the Federation of Parents and Citizens Association in Australia, the National PTA in the U.S.A., the National Confederation of Parent-Teacher Association (NCPTA) in the U.K. and the CEPEP in France. Munn (1993) indicated that in Scotland the parents' groups and parents' associations joined the education authorities and teachers' unions to protest against the central government policy on national testing. In Taiwan, the joint PAs have been successful in influencing the Government in its legislation concerning the education of the handicapped (Lin, 1995).

Whether the PTA Communication Network will be able to develop, liaise, coordinate and support parents' efforts in the various PTAs is to be seen. In the past two years, there were indications that the Government treated this network as (i) a channel of consultation of education and related policies, e.g. the policies of homework and indecent publications, and (ii) a vehicle for public education, e.g. drug education. The establishing of a network of the PTA seems to be a logical move in Government's endeavour. However, the Government has gone too far to give inter-PTA activities the priority in the 1995-96 funding allocation, given the immaturity of many individual PTAs at present. Until now, the majority of PTAs are not able to engage the majority of parents in activities, not to mention representing their opinions. In fact, only 27.6 % of the chairpersons indicated that their PTAs represented more than 60 % of the parents (Ed, 1994, Chapter 35).

5. Towards a model of PTA functions and networking

To provide further understanding of the functions of the PTA, a three-dimensional model is proposed (Figure 1). This model consists of the purposes, the types of interactions (networks) and the operation levels of the PTA that were discussed in Section 3 & 4.

Figure 1 Insert Here

The purposes of the PTA include school-home communication (communication), parent education (education), assistance in teaching and activities (participation) and assistance in formulating school policies (management). The above purposes are in the order of PTA chairpersons' concern.

With reference to Section 4.1, the level of operation of the PTA can be categorized into four levels, including class,

grade, school and inter-PTA.

As to the types of interaction facilitated by the PTA, they may include parent-teacher (P-T), parent-parent (P-P), parent-student (P-S) and parent-teacher-community (P-T-C). These linkages and interactions seem to be inter-related and may reinforce each other.

The three-dimensional model can also be represented via a cube matrix as shown in Figure 2. Cheng and Tam (1994) previously used similar models to illustrate various types of staff development.

Figure 2 Insert Here

Each unit in the matrix can be used to represent one type of PTA activity. For example, a unit may stand for the running of a parent-child game day (P-S) by a class PTA for parent education purpose ; another unit may represent the inter-PTA network hold a seminar for parent managers (P-P) to share their experiences of school management. This matrix model helps to illustrate the kind of varieties of organizations (level of operation) and programmes (purposes & interactions) of the PTA. It also illustrates the stages of concern of PTA chairpersons in the order of communication, education, participation and management (Figure 3) and the shift of the

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Figure 3 Insert Here

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focus of interactions from T-P, towards P-P, P-S and P-T-C. This model may also reflect the weaknesses of the present PTA which has been operated mainly at the school level with little structure and few activities at the class and grade levels.

6. Strategies for Developing the PTA

In this last section, the findings, discussions and the modelling in previous sections concerning the functions of the PTA and its networking will be concluded and recommendations on the strategies for running the PTA will be made.

6.1 To increase the inclusiveness of the PTA

Despite the fact that the PTA was highly regarded by school personnel, its main function at present seems to be compensating the deficient communication between school and home. However, the PTA may not easily fulfill their expectations, at least in its present mode of operation. Many parents were not satisfied with the kinds of messages that they received from the PTA and their primary need to understand and improve their children's academic work and behaviour have not been met via the PTA. Moreover, parents in Hong Kong were very busy. Only a small portion of parents seem to be enthusiastic about the PTA and be benefitted from it. This lacking of inclusiveness is similar to the situation of the PTA in the U.S.A. (Radd, 1993).

Since parents have different needs, the PTA needs to provide a variety of home-school activities to suit their interests (ED, 1994, Chapter 36). To increase the inclusiveness, Radd (1993) suggested that the PTA should include the uninvolved parents in reviewing the procedures and programmes. The parents' opinions, especially of those non-attending parents should be included as far as possible in setting the PTA objectives and in planning programmes.

It appears that the PTA should not only relate itself to the broad issues of the school which concern all parents, but should also focus on meeting individual parents' needs by informing and equipping them to work with their children at home. For this purpose, an alternative mode of PTA operating at the class level may be tried out, preferably in P1 or S1 initially, where parents' interest and concern of their children is optimal. Actually in the U.K., Macbeth (1993) also suggested the PTA might be run at class level, together with a PA at the school level.

To begin with, the PTA may organize the activities which both parents and teachers would support. On the one hand, it is important for the PTA to "get a foot in the door", but on the other hand, it seems that the programme should be a quality one so that it can provide the experience of "early success" to the concerned parties and increase their efficacy belief of the PTA.

To attract parents to join its activities, the PTA may consider a number of innovations. One is to set up a drop-in centre. This is to signify the expectation of the school for better communication. It has been shown in a Liverpool school that the perceptions of teachers and parents were changed as a result (Gains & Pegg, 1984, cited in Radd, 1993). The PTA may also publish a newsletter. Though not all parents are ready to read it, the newsletter may help some enthusiastic parents to

liaise with each other and the school and to remind parents of the existence of the PTA. While operating the PTA at school level (without alumni) appears to be the major practice in Hong Kong, it may be useful to link up alumni and their parents for schools' feedback and support.

Other functions to be considered include the seminars for couples (Leung et al, 1994), monthly meetings for mothers (Leung et al, 1994), the family education fair (Keer & Darling, 1983, cited in Radd, 1993), the parent-child fun day, the parent-child reading programme, the parent orientation programme and the choosing of school programmes (Jackson & Cooper, 1989, cited in Radd 1993).

6.2 to strengthen PTA executives

PTA executive members were often frustrated by the low turn up rate of parents in PTA functions (ED, 1994, Chapter 35). To sustain the efforts of PTA executive members, it would be useful for them to have realistic expectations of the parents that they are working with. They need to recognize that the conditions of Hong Kong families have changed significantly in the past decade (Mok, 1992) and some families are not able to work closely with the school. PTA executive members also need to be aware of the diversity of parents' background and the fact that very few parents are confident, can spare the time and have the expertise to help the running of the PTA.

Strategically, schools may initially liaise and develop a group of available and capable parents to run PTAs. PTA executive members would benefit from each other by their exchange of experiences and ideas. Jackson and Cooper (1989, cited in Radd, 1993) described the effective Parent Involvement Programme (PIP), in which one strategy was to recruit parents from active PTAs to assist in the development of the PTAs in other schools. Moles (1987, cited in Radd, 1993) suggested the organization of national conferences to share exemplary practices of parent partnership. To facilitate the development of the PTA, it appears that the PTA Communication Network may consider developing mechanism(s) for PTA members to discuss and exchange their experiences.

6.3 To reduce parents' barriers

Time constraint of parents has been found to be a real problem in enhancing home-school cooperation. However, it is believed that parents who value children's education would attempt to make themselves available to liaise with the school and to join school programmes and functions. The Plowden report (1967) indicated that parents' support and encouragement

towards their children was critical. It follows that parents need to be inculcated with positive attitudes towards their children's education. In this respect, the PTA may be able to assist the school to achieve this important mission.

Parents' attitudes should be shaped at an early stage. As suggested by Radd (1993), it would be advantageous if parents are recruited to join the PTA when their children are at the pre-school age. Hopefully, if the early PTA experience of parents is positive, parents would be encouraged to develop a habit in working with teachers and in taking part in PTA functions.

Parents' efficacy was found to be positively related to the self-reported practices of parents in working with teachers (Hoover-Dempsey, 1992). To reinforce parents making contacts with the school, it may be desirable for the PTA to regard the upgrading of parent efficacy (parents' perception of their competence in working with children) as its long term objective. To achieve this purpose, the PTA may organize various activities to enable parents to interact positively with teachers, children and other parents. Leung et al (1994) reported that their PTA activities could enhance the confidence of parents. To cultivate parents' confidence, sense of achievement and ownership, Leung (1994) also suggested that teachers should be patient in working with the parents.

6.4 To reduce teachers' barriers

Workload of teachers was seen by school personnel as the major difficulty in enhancing home-school cooperation and in running the PTA. In initial years, many PTAs seem to rely heavily on schools to provide conveniences and support and the workload of the teacher executive members is especially heavy (ED, 1994, Chapter 35 & 36). To reduce teachers' responsibilities in the PTA, it seems that parents should share their duties whenever possible. Besides, the school / the PTA should make an effort to develop a parent profile and to identify the leadership, expertise and various assets among parents.

The teacher's perception of workload may be related to the teacher's perception of his/her own role. It is speculated that any task which was not a part of the teacher's duties in the past would be likely to be treated as extra workload. Thus, the teacher's role in working with parents may need to be emphasized in future pre-service and in-service training of teachers. Individual schools may consider including the teacher's role in working with parents in teachers' contract.

Previously, teachers' reported practices of parent

involvement were found to be significantly related to teachers' efficacy (teachers' perceptions of their competence in teaching children) (Hoover-Dempsey, 1987). Accordingly, low-efficacy teachers may avoid making contacts with parents. To enhance teachers' efficacy and their competence in working with parents, it seems that not only relevant teacher training outside and within the school is needed, teachers also need to be convinced that "pupils can be taught" (Dembo and Gibson, 1985). This certainly has many implications for how the school is managed (Rosenholtz, 1987).

To sustain and to increase teachers' effort in working with parents, teachers' positive and satisfied experience with parents seems to be crucial. These experiences came from their actual practices, e.g. in the running of the PTA and in helping with the parent education programme (ED, 1994, Chapter 36). The school management probably should have a parent policy and mobilize concerned parties and secure resources to support teachers' practices.

6.5 Proposed objectives for Hong Kong PTAs

There has been an unprecedented rapid development of the PTA in Hong Kong. What objectives should these PTAs target at? Should they support the schools by serving as their executive arm or support the families by being the vehicle for parent education? Or should they just remain as a communication channel as many are doing now ?

Though the above purposes may be targeted simultaneously by the PTA, it is suggested that the school-home communication is of prime importance for most PTAs at this stage. The need of improving home-school communication has been agreed by all actors. By strengthening communication, the school-parent relationship may be improved for further ventures.

Parent education is indispensable to many parents in performing their parental roles in caring, educating and cooperating with the school. This demand has been on the increase since family problems have increased and become more complex in Hong Kong (Mok, 1992). In addition, Hong Kong parents are very concerned about their children's education. The efforts of the PTA on parent education would probably be duely rewarded as it was shown in the States that even parents of high school students wanted to know how to help their children at home (Epstein, 1992). The training of parents may be contributed by school teachers as well as social workers. In fact, many teachers are the experts in educating their children at home as well as in subject teaching in school.

What follows is the parents' participation in teaching and

activities. It appears that parents will be available for services to school and the community when they can basically take care of their children at home. Lastly, parents' involvement in top level management in school may become the future target of the PTA. For this level of parent involvement to be effective, it probably requires an adequate school-home communication and substantial partnership experience of teachers and parents in school education, including the exchange of children's information, parent education and participation in teaching and activities. The mutual contributive partnership experience would be able to increase the trust of the two parties, reinforce their good wills and to increase their commitment and competence in cooperation. Hopefully, it would help to facilitate the power sharing with parents in managing the school.

A focus of development of the PTA by stages with reference to its "starting point" may be needed. The emphasis may gradually develop along the line of communication-education-participation-management in terms of purpose and the line of P-T, P-P, P-S and P-T-C in terms of interaction. This strategy may help to promote teacher-parent understanding and relationship and to develop appropriate skills and attitudes of both actors required for further stages of development.

Further, in view of the trend of school-based management worldwide (Education and Manpower Branch, 1991), it may be an advantage if the school personnel can plan together with the PTA and the PTA objectives can be made complementary to the school objectives. This kind of collaboration can probably create and reinforce a consistent and coherent school mission. Lastly, the traditional functions of PTAs in enhancing communication cannot be neglected. The PTA should continue to keep parents well informed about the school, its programme and its plan.

- End -

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Table 1 : No. of Responses of Different Actors in the Survey of the Home-school Cooperation Research

	K	P	S	E	SP	Response Rate
Supervisor	188	316	179	16	18	above 30%
Principal	255	462	294	25	36	above 45%
Teacher	221	621	462	22	39	86%
Parent	4353	10451	8354	323	270	above 90%
PTA Chairpersons			(total no.: 82)			64%

K: kindergarten
P: primary school
S: secondary school
E: English Schools Foundation (ESF) & International Schools
SP: special schools

Table 2: Priorities of the Principal and the Teacher in Setting up the PTA Among the Various Improvement Measures of Home-school Cooperation

	Principal	Teacher
secondary	4	6
primary	5	5
kindergarten	10	10

Table 3: Important Objectives of the PTA as Agreed by PTA Chairpersons

% of PTA Chairperson		Important Objectives
57%	(1)	a means of communication
53%	(2)	to help parents to become part of school community
47%	(3)	a forum for discussion on educational issues
44%	(4)	to provide parenting support
41%	(5)	to inform parents of educational issues so that they can better assist their children
40%	(6)	to represent parents' interest
39%	(7)	to provide support to school/teachers
31%	(8)	to facilitate parents' involvement in decision making and reviewing policies

Table 4: Purposes of Setting Up the PTA Perceived by the Principal and the Teacher in Various Settings

Purposes of PTAs	principal / teacher (%) K	P	S
a. to improve parents' understanding of the aims and operation of schools	97/90	95/86	91/91
b. to reflect and collect parents' opinions to schools	97/89	94/89	93/93
c. to improve the understanding and the relationship between parents and teachers	94/90	94/88	93/91
d. to enlist parent assistance in teaching and activities	79/75	69/66	64/69
e. to undertake the role of parent education	69/53	57/47	52/51
f. assist in formulating school policies	46/35	52/40	56/50

Table 5: Functions of the PTA Perceived by the Manager in Various Settings

Purposes of PTAs	Manager (%)		
	K	P	S
improve the teacher-parent relationship	98	98	98
bridge between parents and schools	87	88	78
provide volunteers to school	40	33	32
participate in formulating school policies	28	36	40

Table 6: Worries about the PTA Shown by the Principal and the Teacher in Various Settings

Worries about PTAs	principal / teacher (%) K	P	S
a. parents' lack of interest	78/77	80/82	83/88
b. parents' lack of time	89/87	91/86	92/94
c. parents' lack of understanding in educational issues	77/75	82/83	82/85
d. heavy workload of teachers	76/76	90/87	92/92
e. infringe professional autonomy of teachers	43/42	42/49	33/37
f. intervene school policies and major operation	52/49	54/45	39/38

Table 7: Percentages of the principal and the teacher agreeing that schools should take up the role of educating parents

	K	P	S	(%)
teacher	34	29	19	
principal	59	38	26	

Table 8: Priorities in PTA Objectives Perceived by Principals, Teachers and PTA Chairpersons

	Principal & Teacher	PTA chairperson
school-home communication	1	1
parent education	3	2
assistance in teaching/activities	2	3
assistance in policy making	4	4

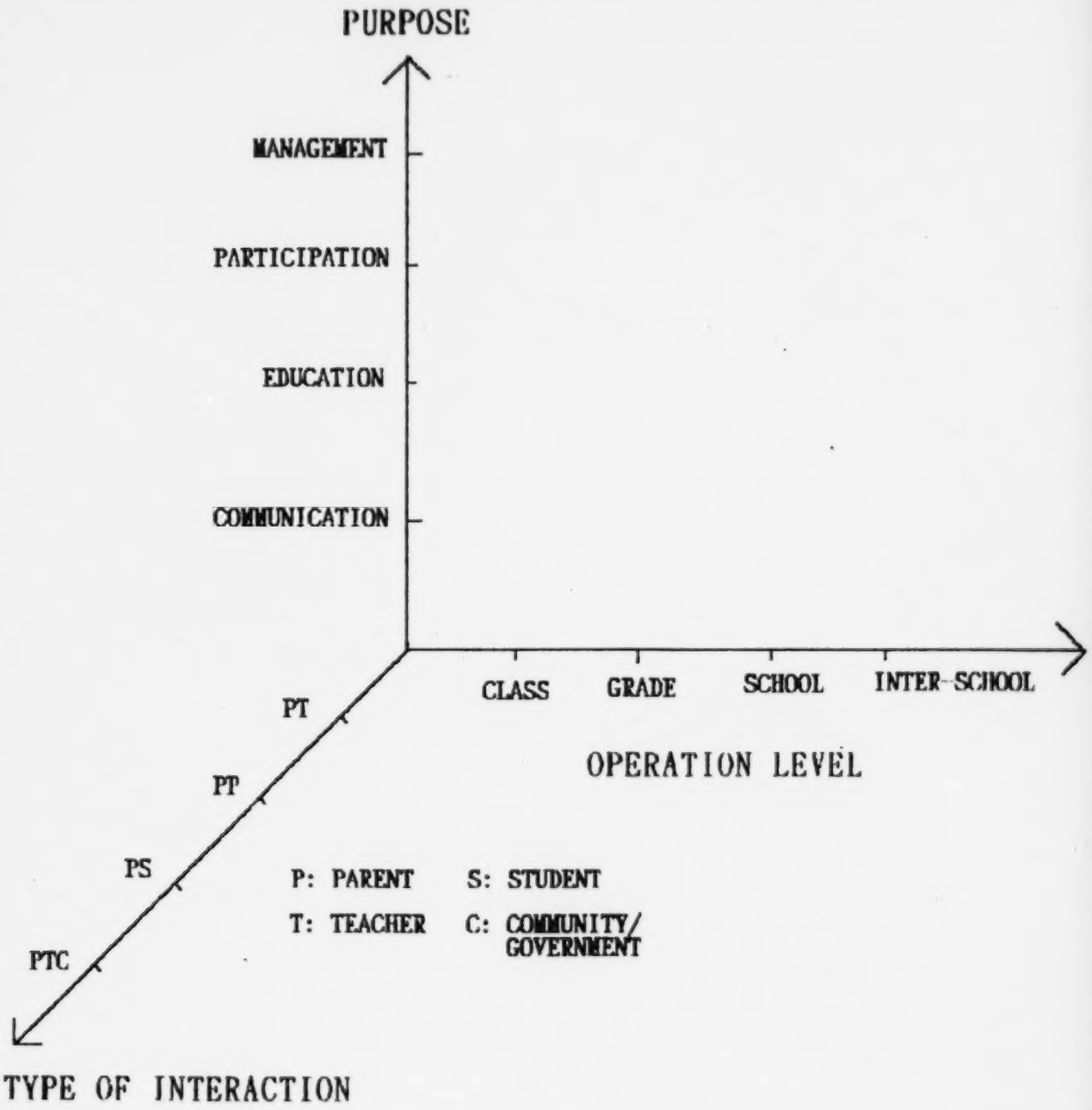

FIGURE 1:THE THREE-DIMENSION MODEL OF PTA NETWORKING

P: PARENT T: TEACHER

S: STUDENT C: COMMUNITY/GOVERNMENT

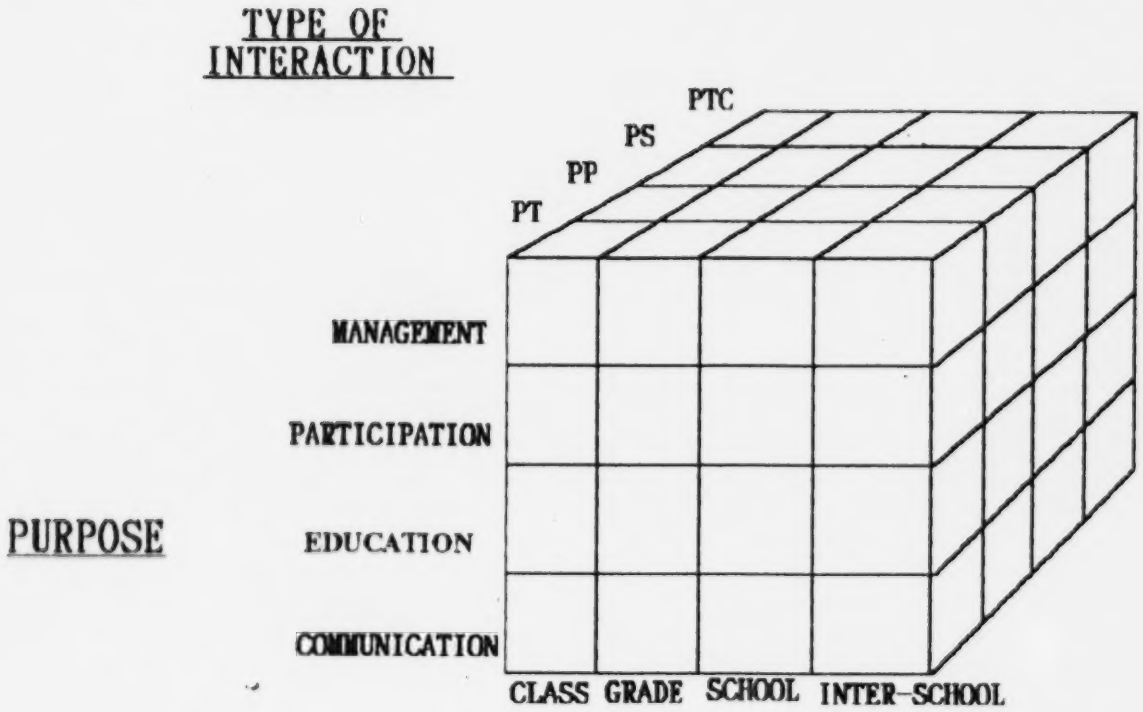

FIGURE 2: THE CUBE MATRIX MODEL OF PTA NETWORKING

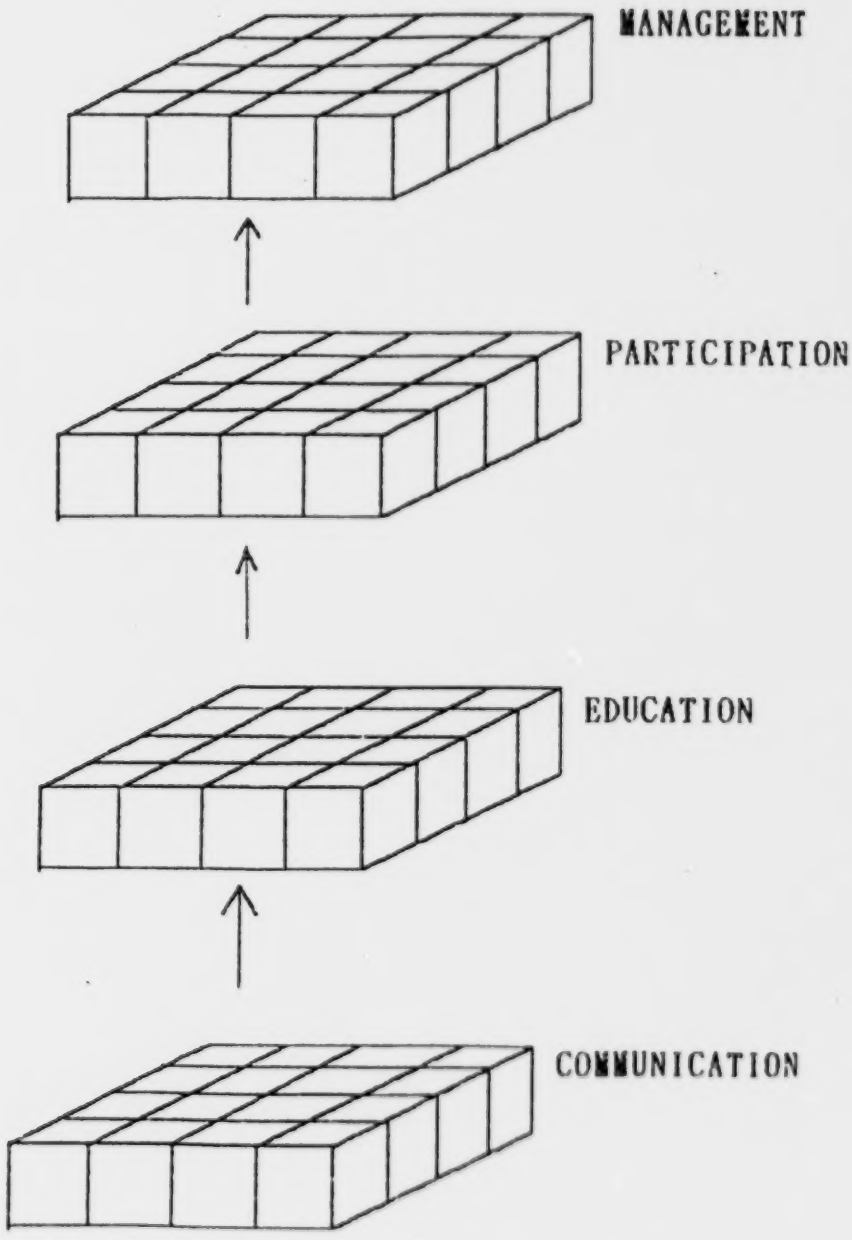

FIGURE 3: DEVELOPMENT GOALS OF PTA